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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA ELECTIONS ROUND TWO: ON TRACK BUT TENSIONS
HIGHER

1)(SBU) Summary: Barring any surprises Gjorge Ivanov appears set to be Macedonia's next president after the April 5 runoff, giving the ruling VMRO further control of the instruments of state. A number of tight mayoral races and widespread allegations of voter intimidation and vote-buying have created a tense environment leading up to the second round. The State Electoral Commission (SEC) is late in making decisions on which polling stations will face round-one re-runs instead of round two elections. Ambassador Reeker has continued rigorous outreach to the most hotly contested municipalities to diffuse tension and encourage citizens to build on the progress made towards free and fair elections in the first round. The Embassy will again have a robust monitoring effort for the second round, with 24 teams covering all areas of the country. End Summary.

Presidential Run-Off Scenarios

2)(SBU) Three possible outcomes exist for Macedonia's presidential run-off between ruling VMRO-backed Gjorge Ivanov and opposition SDSM backed Ljubomir Frckoski. With Ivanov's commanding lead (339,706 votes to 197,703 votes in the March 22 first round) and PM Gruevski's backing, an Ivanov win is most likely, Frckoski prevailing much less so. A third scenario is a failure to reach the 40% turnout threshold mandated by the constitution. Various e-Albanian leaders have reported low motivation within their community to support either candidate, and DPA already declared a boycott of the second round presidential election. Recent public feuding between VMRO and SDSM has also led to speculation that SDSM could even declare a surprise boycott of the second round. This is considered unlikely, and we believe that a mutual support deal between VMRO and e-Albanian coalition partner DUI for the second round should help to achieve the 40% threshold. We, along with others in the International Community, have been encouraging "practicing democracy" through voter turnout.

Tight Second Round Mayoral Races

3)(SBU) Tetovo, Gostivar, Struga, Ohrid, Veles, Gevgelija, and Berovo all feature mayoral races that are either very close, considered "must wins" by the competing parties, or both. Tetovo's race is a dead heat between DPA's Bexheti and DUI incumbent Lika, who garnered 39% of the vote each in the first round. As the ethnic-Albanian stronghold of Macedonia, both parties consider Tetovo a must win. In Gostivar, another important e-Albanian municipality, DUI incumbent Nevzat Bejta faces a virtually insurmountable deficit to returning political star Rumi Osmani (independent), but in spite of this deficit DUI seems determined to pull out all the stops to maintain control of the municipality and halt Osmani's return to political relevance.

Struga, a recent hotspot of inter-ethnic tension, features a run-off indicative of its make up. DUI incumbent Ramiz Merko maintains a modest lead over wealthy e-Macedonian/Muslim "Torbeshi" candidate

Fiat Canoski of the Party for European Future (PEI). The e-Albanian community would consider an e-Macedonian win in Struga a major blow.

The Ohrid race between SDSM incumbent Aleksandar Petreski and VMRO's Kiril Trendafilov is very close, at 41% to 39% in the first round, and VMRO is putting maximum efforts into trying to win this coveted tourist town (which holds considerable nationalist/Orthodox Christian symbolism). In Veles, popular Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) candidate Ace Kocovski maintained a narrow first-round lead over VMRO MP Goran Petrov (49%-43%). National level party deal-making may have an impact on this race, as LDP's public announcement that it will not support SDSM's Frckovski in the second round of presidential elections may cost Kocovski his SDSM backing in Veles mayoral race. In addition to sending MP's in to take on popular incumbents, VMRO is also fighting hard for first-time wins in traditionally SDSM strongholds in eastern Macedonia, including rustic Berovo near the Bulgarian border and the Greek-border town of Gevgelija. VMRO led by 10 percentage points in Gevgelija in the first round, and narrowly trailed (49%- 47%) in Berovo.

Second Round Allegations Abound

4)(SBU) Candidates have made widespread allegations of vote buying, voter intimidation, voter blackmail, phone threats and vote tracking schemes in the lead up to the second round. As with the first round, these allegations may prove exaggerated but merit close monitoring. Some are definitely credible. Opposition parties, both e-Macedonian and e-Albanian, have made repeated allegations against VMRO and DUI for using state institutions to blackmail voters. Rumors allege that these institutions are blackmailing not only their employees but attempting to influence the votes of their employees' friends and families by threatening their jobs. Post has also received reports spanning numerous municipalities that government officials have been going door to door threatening to cut

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off health care and social welfare benefits to voters who do not vote for the local GoM backed candidate. All four e-Albanian candidates in Tetovo and Gostivar have accused their opponents of engaging in large-scale vote buying operations, claiming that votes are going for as much as 100 Euros in some cases. In Tetovo the vote buying is rumored to be so endemic that opposing candidate activists are showing up at individual residences just hours apart with vote buying propositions. Vote buying allegations have been made by candidates in a number of other municipalities as well. In Shuto Orizari, the only Roma-governed municipality in Europe, both candidates have accused each other of vote-buying in after midnight door-to-door visits. Post even received reports that the Ministry of Agriculture is buying votes throughout rural Macedonia with cut firewood.

Government abuse of its ministers and police in election activities has also been cited as a major concern by the opposition. Most alarming of these are claims that Minister of Interior Gordana Jankuloska has allegedly been directing VMRO's campaign activities in the hotly contested and currently SDSM-controlled municipality of Ohrid. In Struga, VMRO-backed challenger Fiat Canovski (PEI) initially expressed concerns over the incumbent's control over local police force but those concerns have flip-flopped since the MOI sent a special police unit there to intimidate DUI voters (Struga is the only municipality where DUI and VMRO are backing opposing candidates).

What's on the Ballot?

5)(SBU) The State Electoral Commission (SEC), given high marks by ODIHR for generally well-administered elections, especially in light of the surprise snow storm that made some polling stations inaccessible and the challenges of the first-ever jointly administered presidential and municipal elections, seems to have slowed its pace of work ahead of the second round, leaving some voters in the dark about what will be on their municipal ballots on April 5. The SEC missed the 48-hour deadline for decisions on parties' appeals of first round results in certain polling stations, and also stalled on assessing the impact on the outcome of municipal elections of the polling stations (134) that did not open due to weather conditions. Now awaiting the decision of the Administrative

Court on appeals of its delayed decisions, the SEC is expected to meet April 1 to make a final decision on which polling stations will have re-runs of the first round of municipal council and mayoral races on April 5. These decisions were made five days earlier in the June 2008 elections, despite substantially more appeals. The SEC is expected to call for re-runs of mayoral races in nearly 70 polling stations, and for municipal council reruns in 120 polling stations. The President of the SEC told us this week that given these delays, it will be difficult to inform voters in a timely fashion of what will be on the ballot--first round or second round elections-- in their particular polling stations.

Embassy Monitoring for Round Two

6)(SBU) Embassy Skopje will deploy 24 monitoring teams throughout the country, and will maintain a command center at the Embassy, as well as an RSO team within the Ministry of Interior. The largest concentration of teams will be in the Skopje-Tetovo-Gostivar region, but we will send teams to cover key races all over the country, including Ohrid, Struga, Veles, Berovo and Gevgelija. In the first round, Embassy teams were an integral part of the overall international effort, often getting information ahead of the larger ODIHR effort. We maintained constant coordination with the ODIHR teams as well as other missions' monitoring teams and the domestic observer organization MOST throughout the first round. The same type of cooperation is planned for the second round, though ODIHR is expected to have only about half as many monitors for the second round as the first, only about 125.

Ambassador Continues to Emphasize Free and Fair Elections

7)(SBU) Following up on his nationwide tour in preparation for the first round of elections, Ambassador Reeker has returned to many of the same municipalities where the races are particularly contested to address the aforementioned issues and encourage additional progress towards free and fair elections through the second round. On March 30 the Ambassador held a public, joint meeting with the candidates and Municipal Election Council (MEC) presidents and deputies of Ohrid and Struga to defuse tensions and obtain their renewed commitment to free and fair elections in the second round. On March 31, Ambassador Reeker held a public meeting with the candidates and MEC members in Tetovo with the same goal and on April 2 he met with the candidates and MEC in Shuto Orizari. The Ambassador will also continue his outreach through the media (sep reporting).

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